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ABSTRACT

This study illustrates how elementary teachers interpret and understand three curriculum models: integrated, thematic, and interdisciplinary. Prior to staff development on these models, inservice elementary teachers (n=22) completed a questionnaire in which open-ended items asked them to reflect upon their understanding of integrated, thematic, and interdisciplinary instruction. Answers were clustered and compared to determine theoretical disposition and understanding. Results indicated that inservice teachers are not in agreement as to the definition, application, or evaluation of integrated, thematic, and interdisciplinary instruction. In addition, they do not make distinctions among these models. Recommendations for teacher development programs include finding ways to target preservice and inservice teachers' theoretical conceptualizations as they impact curriculum choice. Addressing misconceptions of integrated, thematic, and interdisciplinary instruction during teacher preparation and staff development may enable teachers to select and use these curriculum models more effectively in the elementary school classroom. (Contains 11 references.) (Author)

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ELEMENTARY TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS OF INTEGRATION

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Abstract

This study illustrates how elementary teachers interpret and understand three curriculum models: integrated, thematic, and interdisciplinary. Prior to staff development on these models, inservice elementary teachers (n=22) completed a questionnaire in which open-ended items asked them to reflect upon their understanding of integrated, thematic, and interdisciplinary instruction. Answers were clustered and compared to determine theoretical disposition and understanding.

Results indicated that inservice teachers are not in agreement as to the definition, application, or evaluation of integrated, thematic, and interdisciplinary instruction. In addition, they do not make a distinction between each of these models. Recommendations for teacher development programs include finding ways to target preservice and inservice teachers' theoretical conceptualization as it impacts curriculum choice. Addressing misconceptions of integrated, thematic, and interdisciplinary instruction during teacher preparation and staff development may enable teachers to more effectively select and use these curriculum models in the elementary school classroom.

Introduction

In an attempt to help students make sense of the multitude of life's experiences and the fragmented knowledge being taught in the typically splintered, over-departmentalized school curriculum, educators are floundering to implement an integrated curriculum that will focus directly on the problems, issues, and concerns of students. According to Lipson, Valencia, Wixson, and Peters (1993), an enduring argument for integration is that it represents a way to avoid the fragmented and irrelevant acquisition of isolated facts, transforming knowledge into personally useful tools for learning new information.

Efforts to integrate the curriculum have a long history. Stack (1961) traced the philosophical and psychological antecedents to the writing of Herbert Spencer in the 1800s. Harville (1954) traced evidences of early 20th century integrative trends in education, psychology, and anthropology. The progressive education movement strongly emphasized student-centered, integrative approaches to education. Interestingly, Piaget's insistence that interdisciplinarity is a condition of the growth of knowledge has been incorrectly used to bring monodisciplinary instruction into harmony with stages of child development.

Educators are encouraged to utilize integrative methodology to reshape their classroom curricula in response to the various problems or failures in traditional programs. Yet, clear terminology, definitions, and effective guidelines are not easily accessible. The attempts at what might be considered a "holistic" curriculum have taken several aliases. Used often and interchangeably, "holistic" curriculum is referred to as integrated curriculum, thematic instruction, and interdisciplinary instruction.

Rationale for the Study

This study evolved from an administrator's interest in the knowledge of the faculty regarding integration, interdisciplinary instruction, and thematic instruction. Faculty would be involved in staff development prior to implementing an Integrated-Thematic Program. As administration planned for the implementation the Integrated-Thematic Program, it became

apparent that the terms integration, interdisciplinary instruction, and thematic instruction were often used interchangeably. Therefore, to begin implementing the program with a shared understanding of terminology and ideas, it was necessary to clarify teachers' perceptions of these terms. In an effort to determine their understanding prior to staff development, teachers were asked to complete a questionnaire in which open-ended items asked them to reflect on their perceptions of integration, interdisciplinary instruction, and thematic instruction.

Delineation of Curriculum Integration, Thematic Instruction, and Interdisciplinary Instruction

Curriculum integration is not simply an organizational device requiring cosmetic changes or realignments in lesson plans across various subject areas . . . rather, it is a way of thinking about what schools are for, about the sources, of curriculum, and about the uses of knowledge (Beane, 1995). Hughes (1991) recognized that an integrated curriculum has four critical attributes. Initially, an integrated curriculum is authentic, providing learning experiences attuned to the way students learn. Secondly, it is generative, encouraging the construction of meaning, the attainment of insights, and the utilization of new knowledge. By definition, it is integrative, requiring and promoting higher order thinking and transference of concepts across disciplines. Finally, it is iterative, the curriculum itself, as well as the child's experience, is an evolutionary outcome of a cyclical learning process that involves successive stages of problem formulation, concept formation, application, evaluation, reflection, and modification (Hughes, 1991).

Curriculum integration revolves around two spheres: (a) self- or personal concerns and (b) issues and problems posed by the larger world (Beane, 1995). Beane carried this concept further by saying that the central focus of curriculum integration is the search for self- and social meaning. By facilitating this search within a framework of curriculum integration, two things occur. Beane stated:

First, young people are encouraged to integrate learning experiences into their schemes of meaning so as to broaden and deepen their understanding of themselves and their world.

Second, they are engaged in seeking, acquiring, and using knowledge in an organic - not an artificial - way. That is, knowledge is called forth in the context of problems, interests, issues, and concerns at hand. And since life itself does not know the boundaries or compartments of what we call disciplines of knowledge, such a context uses knowledge in ways that are integrated. (p. 616)

Rather than the mastery of fragmented information, integration finds its central focus in life. It is rooted in a view of learning as the continuous integration of new knowledge and experience so as to deepen and broaden our understanding of ourselves and our world (Beane, 1995). Beane stressed that integration concerns the active construction of meanings rather than the passive assimilation of others' meanings. He further emphasized that, most importantly, it serves the students for whom the curriculum is intended rather than the specialized interests of adults.

Whatever reasons motivate curriculum integration, the transformation from fragmented, departmentalized, or isolated instructional periods to integrated contexts is effectively accomplished through the development of a theme (Lipson et al., 1993). Thematic instruction is touted by the "teaching materials" industry as being self-evident and through strong rhetoric it convinces many teachers of the infallibility of the materials. Lipson et al. emphasized that details and specifics of defining and implementing a thematic approach are unclear. While materials are replete with admonitions and examples, there are few opportunities for teachers to gain perspective on the types of decision making that are required to plan curriculum. Routman (1991) addressed this problem by advocating that commercially produced materials, while they focused on a central topic, do not develop important ideas. She identified this as correlation not integration.

Superficial themes are identified by Routman as topical themes such as circus, bears, cars, monsters, dragons, and spiders. These themes lack the "powerful ideas" that allow the curriculum to cultivate a depth of understanding and allow students to link knowledge and ideas across contexts. This cannot happen when labels and superficial commonalities have been used as the basis for generating thematic connections (Lipson et al., 1993).

Thematic units promote a view of both teaching and learning as meaningful enterprise. Roser and Hoffman (1992) suggested that themes provide a framework for the students' discoveries of connections which can result in the acquisition of an integrated knowledge base. An integrated knowledge base generally results in faster retrieval of information, more flexible problem solving, and better concept transfer across content areas (Rabinowitz & Glaser, 1985). Further, themes provide coherence and focus necessary for making instructional decisions. To create a classroom characterized by meaningful enterprise, themes must be coherent, make genuine connections through thoughtful responses to literature, provide depth and breadth in learning, promote metacognitive awareness, develop positive attitudes, and provide for effective use of time.

Two broad types of themes are advocated in curricular programs: intradisciplinary and interdisciplinary. These two types of organizations allow determination of what content and processes will be integrated and where to place the emphasis. In this paper, only interdisciplinary instruction will be addressed.

Interdisciplinary instruction tends to have a strong content focus. However, it is clearly intended to blend the content with reading and writing processes and to unify concepts across several content disciplines (Jacobs, 1989). Topics organized by concept would be selected for their ability to generate issues, concepts, and questions (Hughes, 1991). According to Lipson et al., interdisciplinary instruction is ambitious as it requires teachers to use the scope and sequence of one discipline as a skeleton on which to attach skills and concepts from other disciplines; thus, other content areas serve as important, but supplementary, adjuncts.

Interdisciplinary instruction is not merely a pedagogical technique. Ultimately, it is a complicated holistic, developmental, interactive, and inherently imprecise process for which there is no exact blueprint (Panaritis, 1995). For decades, interdisciplinary instruction has waxed and waned within the boundaries of the education arena. Outside the education arena and within the world of practical affairs, there is a quickly growing trend toward interdisciplinarity. Bringing the issue into perspective, Cohen (1978) stated that discipline boundaries are temporary and

penetrable. Increased knowledge has given rise new disciplines emerging as two or more disciplines combine. In essence, this demands that education move away from a compartmentalized curriculum.

Results of the Study

While a review of the literature indicated a clear distinction between the three instructional models, results from this study revealed that inservice elementary teachers are not in agreement as to the definition, application, or evaluation of the three instructional models: integrated, interdisciplinary, or thematic. The themes emerging from this study indicate that inservice teachers will need training and support from administration to implement the proposed Integrated-Thematic Program. In general, responses show lack of clear understanding and suggest that clarification through staff development is necessary prior to implementation of the program. The following synopsis illustrates a representative sample of the descriptions given by inservice teachers. Their responses indicate a variety of themes.

Definition

When asked to describe the similarities and/or differences between integrated, interdisciplinary, and thematic models of instruction, inservice teachers were unclear and sometimes contradictory. Descriptions were categorized as follows: (a) three models are the same, (b) subject areas mesh together with no distinction between the models, and (c) interdisciplinary instruction includes all curriculum areas but thematic instruction and integration can be fragmented.

Application

Inservice teachers were asked to describe evidence of these models in their classrooms. Descriptions revealed a variety of responses, but none were clearly linked to any one instructional model. Their responses revolved around ideas like cooperative learning, literature activities, writing in the various curriculum areas, and implementing the instructional model through the fine arts curriculum. This area too, needs to be addressed through careful training.

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Evaluation

When inservice teachers were asked to identify the value of integration, interdisciplinary instruction, and thematic instruction, the following responses were among those given: (a) "the ability to cover more material", (b) "can show connections between the subject areas", (c) "use instructional time more effectively", and (d) "increased student interest." In addition, they responded that (a) "more time was required for planning" and (b) "planning was more difficult."

Recommendations

As indicated by responses to questions regarding the definition, application, and evaluation of the three instruction models, staff development prior to implementation of the Integrated-Thematic Program will need to target and thoroughly address inservice teachers' theoretical conceptualizations and their relationship to daily and long-term instructional decisions. Suggestions that may prove beneficial to teachers after completion of staff development include: (a) release time to learn, plan, implement, and evaluate for integration, (b) resources to nurture, sustain, and expand efforts to integrate, and (c) patience and flexibility from the administration that will allow the program to develop effectively and fully.

Closing Remarks

To the young mind everything is individual, stands by itself. By and by, it finds how to join two things and see in them one nature; then three, then three thousand . . . discovering roots running underground whereby contrary and remote things cohere and flower out from one stem . . . The astronomer discovers that geometry, a pure abstraction of the human mind, is the measure of planetary motion. The chemist finds proportions and intelligible method throughout matter; and science is nothing but the finding of analogy, identity, in the most remote parts.
-Emerson

Integration, thematic instruction, and interdisciplinary instruction have the potential to promote genuinely meaningful teaching and learning. At their best, the implementation of these models can help make visible the patterns and concepts that are shared by more than one body of knowledge or discipline. The mission of helping young minds find "roots", as stated by Emerson, can be achieved. However, orchestration will require careful consideration and thoughtful planning.

Integration, interdisciplinary instruction, and thematic instruction are not a panacea, but rather an opportunity. They are an opportunity to implement a curriculum that recognizes subject matter, students' needs, and society's problems. Ultimately, the curriculum will involve integrated, worthwhile concepts and will make worthwhile connections between the disciplines. The success of these efforts will rely, as always, on a well-informed and knowledgeable teacher who is willing and able to make discriminating decisions and respond to students (Lipson et al., 1993).

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